

## [Small Town Life]

W9670

Beliefs and Customs - Sketches

Accession no.

W9670

Date received

10/10/40

Consignment no.

1

Shipped from

Wash. Office

Label

Amount 12p.

(incl. forms

A-D)

WPA L. C. PROJECT Writers' UNIT

Form md] 3

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Folklore Collection (or Type)

Title Small town life

Place of origin Portland, Oregon Date 3/27/39

Project worker William C. Haight

Project editor

Remarks Form A

Circumstances of Interview

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker William C. Haight Date March 29, 1939

Address Washington Hotel, Portland, Oregon

Subject Small Town Life

Name and address of informant Mrs. Erret Hicks, Canyon City, Oregon

Date and time of interview March 14, 1939

Place of interview Home of Mrs. Erret Hicks, Canyon City, Oregon

Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant

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None

Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

Former home town of interviewer

Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

Mrs. Hicks had just moved into a not quite completed, new modern five-room home. The house is particularly noteworthy for its modern conveniences. Indirect lighting, and air conditioning, were two of the features of interest. The tiling effect used extensively in the kitchen and bathroom was beautifully done. The fireplace was made from native rock, quite attractive, although a little rustic for the extreme modernness of the rest of the house.

Form B

Personal History of Informant

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker William C. Haight Date March 29, 1939

Address Washington Hotel, Portland, Oregon

Subject Small Town Life

Name and address of informant Mrs. Erret Hicks, Canyon City, Oregon

Information obtained should supply the following facts:

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1. Ancestry
2. Place and date of birth
3. Family
4. Places lived in, with dates
5. Education, with dates
6. Occupations and accomplishments with dates
7. Special skills and interests
8. Community and religious activities
9. Description of informant
10. Other points gained in interview

1. Dutch-Irish.
2. May 9th, 1873, Canyon City, Oregon.
3. One husband, three sons, Edwin, Arthur, and Prentiss.
4. Canyon City, Oregon. Griggsville, Illinois, Four years, but does not remember dates.
5. Graduate of Griggsville, Illinois, High School.
6. Music teacher, housewife.
7. Earning money, and building houses.

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8. Episcopalian. Organist, choir singer, active in Guild, lodges and general civic work.

9. Small, dark-eyed, dark-haired, well-preserved, lady. Wiry, and quick in actions. Most distinguishing characteristic is her peculiar giggle.

10. Mrs. Hicks has lived with a man that has been drunk for 40 years. Not nicely tight, but almost stupefied by liquor. How he has done it, and how she has stood it has long been a question in the minds of the natives. Mrs. Hicks says she is so used to Erret being drunk she forgets half the time he is even around.

10. While talking to her she giggled and said, "You know I do believe that I am not going to be free at all. I think Erret will outlive me." While talking about her practical youngest son she told how he got his wife. It seems that Edwin was interested in marrying a wealthy, socially prominent girl. With this goal uppermost in mind he set out into the world to gain his wife. He finally found two that would have him and that he would have. After carefully weighing the advantages of each he finally chose and married well. He not only fulfilled his life-time ambition but presumably married a lovely girl. Mrs. Hicks commented, "Edwin got his wife just like most people buy a horse. The way he landed that woman reminded me of Will Rogers' in "David Harum."

Mrs. Hicks has a rather odd outlook on life. She is a source of much good-natured amusement in Canyon City. She told me that her brother Dick told her he thought she was terrible. Dick said, "Most girls are silly when they are growing up, and serious during their adult life., but you were the most serious child I have ever known, and certainly the silliest woman I have ever known." Perhaps the above will illustrate the woman's peculiar thought processes.

Form C

Text of Interview (Unedited)

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Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

### OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker William C. Haight Date March 29, 1939

Address Washington Hotel, Portland, Oregon

Subject Small Town Life

Name and address of informant Mrs. Erret Hicks. Canyon City, Oregon

Text:

The clearest memory of my youth is the horror and fear of the prevalent predictions that the world was coming to an end. I actually worried myself sick each time a new prediction came out. The first time I saw fire-flies I screamed with fright and horror—I knew the world was coming to an end. This fear I carried close to my heart until I was a grown woman.

Despite the worry and fear over the end of the world, I managed to have a good time. Particularly did I enjoy the sleigh riding and coasting in the winter. The young men of the town would hitch up the horses to a sleigh and gather all us girls up. The back end of the sleigh would be filled with hay, and warm soft blankets. We would snuggle down underneath the blankets and sing songs, tell stories, and of course, make love.

Young men courted the women with a degree of dignity not used today. There was none of the “Hiya Toots” stuff, I hear my grandchildren saying. Candy, bouquets of wild flowers, and lace handkerchiefs were given as symbols of interest by the swain to his girl.

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It might have been a wild old town but ladies were treated like ladies. Why dear me, you wouldn't think of dancing with a man that had liquor on his breath.

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The dances were rather formal affairs, we would have a floor manager, music manager, invitational manager, and another manager to escort single unaccompanied ladies home if they were unfortunate enough to need him. Oh yes—there was the call manager. He always solemnly announced each dance, and if necessary gave the calls for the dance. At our dances the young men always folded a silk handkerchief over their hand so they would not soil our dresses.

Service to the church has been a main feature of my life—one that has carried through all the years of my life. The most amusing anecdote I ever heard in church, and one that seems to be a classic around here, concerned the story of Jesus walking on the water. One Sunday I told the story to my Sunday School class. At the end of the period I told the young children that the following Sunday one of them would have to tell me the story.

The next time the class assembled only one boy seemed to remember the story. He told the story well. However, he ended it a little breathlessly with, “and I'll bet Jesus' mother gave him a lickin' for getting his feet wet.”

Another young man was the janitor of the church. The high ceilings in the building made it almost impossible to heat. He would try very hard to get it warm, but still we nearly froze. One morning he had tried very hard, but the church was still very cold, so he offered the following prayer at the start of his class:

“Dear God. I've been tryin' awfully hard in my mortal way to heat this place up. I can't figure out anything else to do to get it warm except to turn my job over to you. Will you please heat this place in your own Heavenly manner? Thank you, Father.”

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Church services were interrupted one time by Big Pat, a lovable, notable, character here. Big Pat was a gay fellow, but with it all a devout Episcopalian. He donated much of the money for the windows and altar furniture of the church. Well, everyone was down on his knees praying solemnly, when Big Pat's gun slipped out of his holster, fell on the floor, and went off. Above the din and commotion his voice beamed out to his wife, Mary— "Jesus—Mary, I've shot our way to Hell." Big Pat was so humiliated by the accident and by his words he stayed home indoors for nearly a week.

This same man died as the result, at least everyone think's so, of a superstition. Many people believe that if there is one death in the community two more will follow rapidly. Big Pat believed in this firmly. His wife died on the second of January, one year later his daughter died on the third. Pat knew that he would die the following January. So, convinced of this fact, he went to Baker and stayed in the hospital many months. Then moved to the Hot Lake Sanitorium. There was nothing wrong with him other than the belief he was destined to die in January. Well, he lived until the following March. I think that is one of the strangest things I ever knew anything about.

The Church is the one building in town that has not burned down or been flooded out. Every time the town has burned down it's burned right to the church and stopped there. We all believe that God has protected the building from any harm. I can't think of any other reason that would have saved the church.

Have you ever heard of the legend that has been built around the fire of 1898? Well, its rather interesting. Personally, I believe the story is true.

The evening of the fire an out-of-town minstrel troupe was playing 4 at the local opera house. The last song of the evening was a solo called "There Will Be A Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight." After the performance everyone returned to their homes. In a short while the fire bell rang out the fateful news. The old hotel was on fire.

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All that night the townspeople fought the fire. Our home was turned into a community kitchen. We cooked ham, eggs, toast, and coffee until I thought I could never face an egg again as long as I lived. Oh yes, and hot biscuits by the hundreds we made. One reason was because it was colder than Greenland's icy mountains; despite the heat from the flames.

Well, the story about the fire is that the fellow that sung the song was a morphine addict. To make the song a real hit he burned the town down. At least we know that he disappeared during the night and was never heard from again.

(The interviewer remembers when some men were digging up a main in the town. At that time they found a boot, and some man laughed and said, "I guess it belongs to \_\_\_\_\_". The name escapes my memory but the reference was made to the man who burned the town.)

You know I was only sixteen when I came back from Griggsville. Even so I was considered an extremely well educated woman. All the school boards in the county wanted me to teach in their district.

I finally went to Fox and taught there, earning \$55.00 per month. School life then was not much different than it is now. The children used a double desk, whereas now they have single seats. I taught them precious little, I am sure. The curricula um? included reading, writing, arithmetic, history and geography. Rather amusing is the fact that I had three pupils that were 20 years old, and one 19. The 19 year old boy I had to whip. He just stood and laughed while I tried to whip him with the ruler. A girl student in arithmetic had gone further in that subject than I had.

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When I was living in Fox, food was terribly hard to get. There we were so far from everyone, and most of the time the roads and trails were impassable.

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I know I paid 50 cents for one orange. I was so desperately hungry for fruit of somekind, I think I would have paid \$5.00 had it been necessary. Our daily food was uninspired, and hard to choke down after eating the same things every day for a few months. The usual fare was hominy, mush, wild game, beans, and potatoes. Usually the potatoes would freeze and we couldn't use them. I certainly earned my salary there.

Clothes were not such a problem. About all we needed was something to keep us warm. I wore cotton stockings or wool ones, high, buttoned shoes, calico dresses, and long, heavy, woolen underwear, topped by several petticoats. I don't see how these young girls get by today with — Te-he, — a dress and a slip.

When any one in Fox died it presented a real problem. First place, the ground was most always frozen and hard to dig in. Too, there were absolutely no facilities at all for burial purposes. Sometimes in order to keep the bodies for a day they would pack them in ice. Always someone had to stay beside the bodies and keep the cats and rats away until burial time. No wonder the families carried on at such a rate. My, how they would howl, wail, and rant! The funerals were heart-rending indeed. All burials had a harshness to them that now there isn't. There were no flowers, only a home-made rough box, and quite often no minister. In several instances the people buried their relatives without even a pine box; just a blanket wrapped around them.

The customs of mourning following the death of a relative were severe. You had to wear black for a year. The second year you could wear 6 black and white. The third year, gray, black or white. Widows usually confined their colors to those three regardless of the number of years. No forms of entertainment could be attended for a year. The second year you could go to a few things but not to many. When anyone had courage enough to break the dismal tradition they were severely criticised.

Transportation? Most of the methods were comparable to the medieval torture stories we read about. Gracious! I wonder now how I ever stood it.

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One trip that was particularly hard to take was on the stagecoach from Canyon City to Baker. This trip would take three days of the roughest riding you could imagine, with the roughest language coming from the driver you could imagine, too. I have heard those poor horses called everything under the sun. Te-he—It was kind of silly—a lady wasn't supposed to know any swear words—but my heavens, we learned plenty when we took a trip on the stage-coach.

The old coach would creek, groan, rock and bounce every inch of the way. We'd go from mud to the hubs, to dust so thick you would have to keep a handkerchief over your face to breathe. At times the four or six horses would be unable to pull the coach, and we would have to get out and walk. The shank's mare wasn't so bad unless it was done in mud, which it usually was. However, most anything was a relief to get out of those torture chambers and rest your bruised and baffled body.

Golly dingit, do you know that it took us three full days to travel 100 miles?

One of the famous stopping places was at Austin, Oregon. The lady that ran the place was a noted cook. My, what wonderful meals she would serve! Despite the fact the men would always call the food mule-fodder, <sup>7</sup> I noticed they ate it like they liked to stow it away. She was one of the first persons in that country to serve carrots. Most people felt that carrots were only good fodder for stock.

The McKuwen and Whitney stops were also well and favorably known. I always had a jolly time at both of those stops. Those people were rather gay and seemed to appreciate having a jolly time. I believe I first learned to play whist at the Whitney's. It became quite a popular card game all over the nation.

At home we used ordinary buggies, hayracks, or the deluxe sedans for transportation. Of course the saddle horse was always used. However, there really was little need for transportation because we seldom went any place we couldn't walk to. Nowadays if you

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don't travel around several hundred miles a month you are hopelessly out of the swim of things.

(The following are superstitions that Mrs. Hicks believes in.)

1. If a bird flies in your house or around a window of your house you will surely have a death in your family. (She is certain this is true because when she was going to school a bird flew in the school room and the following day a small boy was drowned while swimming.)
2. If a dog howls under your window it is a sure sign of death for someone you love.
3. The breakage of any thing you like or admire is a sign that you are either losing a friend or a sweetheart.
4. You should never start anything on Friday that you can't finish that day. Never start a trip on that day.
5. If there is one death in the community it will be followed by two more.
6. Never turn your back on the cross, or bad luck will follow.
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7. Always put your right shoe on first, or bad luck will follow.
8. Never name a child before it is born or death will follow.
9. If a child is born with a caul over his face he will never suffer a death of drowning, and will be a genius.
10. Never tell your sweetheart of your past loves or you will kill his love. (This seems to be to me plain common sense, however, she said it was a superstition.)

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Slang phrases I remember are pretty much the same today. Although we never used nearly as many as they do now.

Golly dingit,

Gosh darnit,

Hell'n high water—————used as “We went through hell'n high water to get there.”

Carnsarn it.

Dumfounded bloke——someone supposed to be silly.

Old bilk————old fogey, silly old man, a cheater.

Life has been a lot of fun for me. Despite Erret and his eternal drunkenness I have managed to have a good time. Perhaps it is due to the fact that as Dick says, I'm too silly to know better. But then I don't think that is quite true, either.

Form D

Extra Comment

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker William C. Haight Date March 29, 1939

Address Washington, Hotel, Portland, Oregon.

## Library of Congress

Subject Small Town Life

Name and address of informant Mrs. Erret Hicks, Canyon City, Oregon.

Comment:

Mrs. Hicks was quite willing to give me any information she had, but for some reason she couldn't remember very much. As she said, "I've spent all my time thinking about how I can earn some money."

There is a standing joke among the natives about Mrs. Hicks with her money-making proclivities. Dr. Ashford, an early doctor of the community, said that you could put Mrs. Hicks on the Sahara Desert without a single civilized instrument, and in six months she would come home with all expenses paid, a profit, and a mortgage on the desert.

Rather amusing was her method in getting a hundred dollars from her husband. It seems that some man had owed Erret a hundred dollars for several years. Finally he offered to pay Mr. Hicks. Mrs. Hicks in some way got the man to pay her. Mrs. Hicks said, "Erret has been storming around here calling me a thief, a liar, a bad woman, but—te-he,—I don't care, I got the hundred!"